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ABSTRACT

Five American cultural characteristics hinder communication in foreign cultures: feelings of Anglo-American superiority, a myopic and insular mentality due to geographic isolation, lack of international perspective, chronic anti-intellectualism, and snobism attributed to the speaking of foreign languages by those who do not. Professionals teaching foreign languages have been hindered in their goal of promoting intercultural communication by their own insularity, a narrow focus on only language students, and a narrow focus on instructional material and content. However, the profession has begun to make some progress in these areas. In addition, there are peculiarly American traits and factors that can aid in dealing with other cultures: geographic mobility, ethnic consciousness, popularization of foreign cultures, an eagerness to do good, pragmatism, the motivation of good students to enroll in college language courses, the reinstatement of foreign language requirements, which are increasingly tied to proficiency rather than an accumulation of credits, and a trend toward international education. There are ways to change the negative attitudes and capitalize on the positive ones to promote intercultural communication and foreign language learning. (MSE)

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Thomas H. Geno

June 1982

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DEFENSE LANGUAGE INSTITUTE, FOREIGN LANGUAGE CENTER

ACTFL MASTER LECTURE SERIES

Common American Attitudes that Help and Hinder in Communicating in a Foreign Culture

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FOREWARD

For the past several years, prominent members of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) have been presenting lectures to the faculty and staff of the Defense Language Institute, Foreign Language Center. The purpose of these lectures has been to discuss recent trends and developments in foreign language learning and teaching as well as to strengthen professional contacts between DLIFLC and ACTFL.

The ACTFL Master Lecture, "Common American Attitudes that Help and Hinder in Communicating in a Foreign Culture," by Dr. Thomas H. Geno, was presented at the DLIFLC in June 1982. This paper is published to make the content of the lecture fully accessible to the DLIFLC professionals.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent an official position of the DLIFLC nor of any other element of the United States Department of Defense.

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Latest technical advances, good teaching materials, audio-visual aids, good teacher training programs, competent and valid research data, a good sense of theatre, and the like can all contribute to the effectiveness of learning how to communicate in a foreign culture.

In other words, hardware, software, a teacher's personality, formation and culture all constitute an appreciable part of the communicative process. If a combination of these elements is blended correctly in the classroom mixer, the student should be helped and not hindered in learning how to deal with that target culture.

However, we use the conditional "should be" advisedly, since there are factors, both interior and exterior, which can sour the whole process. These factors are attitudes - most of them purely American in nature - which create conflicts in the psyches of us all - teachers and students.

Now these American attitudes perhaps have little bearing on teachers here at DLI, since I'm given to understand that the majority of you are native-born teachers of the country whose language you teach. However, your students have some of these attitudes and perhaps many of their teachers in high school and elsewhere might have had some of these attitudes. If you come upon them in your classrooms, can they be dealt with? I hope to show you they can.

However, does the teaching staff of the DLI have its own special attitudes stemming from other cultural traditions? I would ask each of you to reflect on these American attitudes to see if you, too, might not have certain attitudes which you can identify as stemming from your own individual set of cultural standards.

I would hope in the process of this communication that we might be able to examine the whole question of attitudes - societal and professional - which help and hinder at the same time both ourselves and our students as we tackle our rather bold task of teaching "tongue-tied" and "ugly" Americans how to communicate in a foreign culture.

Many contemporary jokes start with the line: "There's good news and there's bad news". I think this opener fits this occasion, for I'm somewhat in a quandary as to what to discuss with you first - the good news or the bad news - the helps or the hindrances.

Since I'm an optimist by nature, I think I'd rather end my communication on an upward note, so I'll save the best for last. Let's start with the hindrances. What common American attitudes hinder communication in foreign cultures?

Let's be candid. The one that strikes me most is one that was noted by that great observer of the American scene, Alexis de Tocqueville. It's the Anglo-American superiority complex. A combination of factors - superior power, industry, and "civilization" - imbued the American people very early in the game with a self-sufficiency hitherto unknown in the civilized world. If one has everything and can only look forward to an upward mobility

then why should one desire something else? Americans - until only very recently - have been complacent and adamant about their superior place in the sun. This does not help in dealing with foreign cultures. Unfortunately this creates a certain American intolerance stemming directly from ignorance.

The second feature - which really stems from the first and de Tocqueville also called it to the attention of his readers - is an inborn myopic and insular mentality due to America's geographical location: vast oceans separating us from everything on both the east and west; sparsely populated and potential, but "inconsequential" friends to the north; jungles, desert, and a "deteriorating" and "decadent" civilization to the south. We certainly have no need for dealing with these entities! Again, this has not helped us historically in our dealings with our neighbors to the north or to the south. It is a reality with which we have come to grips only recently as we learn that we are not alone on this continent. This can be turned around, as I shall mention later.

A third hindrance only too naturally stems from the first two: we have no international mindedness. If we do have some vestige of it, it probably stops in the kitchen as we culturally eat our way through France's bread, cheese, and wine; Spain's paealla; German sausage and beer; Cantonese and Szechuan dishes; tempura, sake and suki-yaki, and Italian pasta. We get as far as the stomach, but we never have any "gut feeling" about these countries and their culture.

All of this has led to a blurring of the world scene. We see Europe, as opposed to its unique component parts; we see Asia as a single Mongolian entity; we see the Mid-east as totally Arab; we think of anything south of us as "Latin" and never examine the unique cultures and thought patterns of each country.

These three characteristics - anglo-american superiority complex, geographical isolation, and no reason to be international exist in history. As history changes, so can these attitudes, and I think they are changing and will continue to change.

However, another attitude that lies deep-rooted in the American psyche bothers me much more: it's America's chronic anti-intellectualism. This poses a really perplexing paradox: We believe in everyone's having an education, but we disdain the intellectual exercise. Since the study of foreign languages and cultures has been traditionally packaged as an intellectual activity, we are thus inclined to dislike it. It's even more strange that we can look upon the American language as the most acceptable of tools - purely a pragmatic function - but we seem to see no other language in that same light. Ph.D. packaging has really taken its toll among Americans and their attitudes towards other cultures.

Tied to this academic dilemma is another hindrance: a certain snobism attributed to those who speak foreign languages by those who don't. After all, in the egalitarian society, shouldn't

we all speak the same language? Being different just isn't American; in fact, it's tantamount to being un-American. And some people - too many of them, I fear - fall right into the trap that caters to the "haves" and alienates the "havenots." I've noticed that the French, in particular, have catered to this sense of snobism in their marketing of luxury products in this country: a French restaurant just has to be something special; French perfumes have almost no equals and they even "dare" to print their ads in French. In the New Yorker of Nov. 23, 1981, Yves Laurent had three full page ads; each one more elegant than the other. Two were aimed at the female clientele; one was aimed at the males:

OPIUM - pour celles qui adorent St. Laurent

RIVE GAUCHE - n'est pas un parfum pour les femmes effacées

KOUROS - les dieux vivants ont leur parfum

Of course this carries on in the marketing of French silks and designer fashions, French cognac and Champagne. All of these items carry a certain aura of luxury about them, but address themselves only to an elite. It's easy to see the other side of the coin among the great masses of Americans who resent this ostentation. Their reactions are couched in expressions such as "Pig Alley" for Pigalle and manifested in gestures of contempt as French wines are poured into the gutter when French-American relations are strained.

Now the preceding are more or less historical and societal. Let us now turn to the professional hindrances - and by professional I mean those which come directly from those professionals who teach foreign languages and cultures.

Allow me to fall into my own trap of the anglo superiority by

quoting Shakespeare as we start this discussion about the profession.

In Act I, scene 2 of Julius Caesar we find the following:

"Men at sometime are master of their fates
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings."

I'm placing a good deal of the blame on us - on the profession - for some of the hindrances, the barriers that we put up which hinder our effectiveness as communicators of culture. How have we done this?

For example, in a product-oriented society we've not touted our product. Is it because we weren't sure of its value? I doubt it. It's just because we're trying to "sell" something which, to many consumers, is an intangible. And goodness knows, in an age of hard sell, it's difficult enough to sell tangibles.

Professionally, we have not been conscious enough of the value of good public relations. No one is "pushing" except to those who are already converted. We've lacked the creativity to penetrate other interested groups, and society, in general.

Here at DLI, this is most probably not a problem. The values of a foreign language and its culture are tangibles for your clientele - immediately used tangibles attached, very often, to a reward system. You have an almost built-in motivational factor.

But, professionally, how can we motivate John and Jane Q. Public? We've only just begun to realize that it's a necessity. Until we face up to this reality and do something about it, we hinder ourselves and our product. By extension, until we solve

this dilemma, we're hardly giving access to a healthy climate for communicating in a foreign culture.

Since, by tradition we have not faced up to the reality of Public Awareness, it only follows that the political arm of that awareness has been even less strong. We've just not been political animals. Therefore, we lack clout at local, state, and national levels. And we've done it all to ourselves by ourselves.

May I indulge in Shakespeare again? In his Twelfth Night we hear: "Some are born great; some achieve greatness; and some have greatness thrust upon them."

It's the latter case that applies to us, I fear. I fear it because I wonder if we can handle it. I'm not about to forget one of the first salvos fired by Congressman Paul Simon as things were gearing up for the formation of the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies. He said: ".. those who know foreign languages will have to start paying more attention to the political processes, so that those who know the political processes can start making the right decisions about foreign languages." ("Battling Language Chauvinism." Change, [Vol. 9, No. 11], November, 1977.) Are we truly ready for this?

I find it nothing less than amazing to have been a part of the growing awareness within the profession, of the power that comes from political involvement. In the Northeast Conference and then in ACTFL it was mind-boggling to see academic types going all out on a political limb. The opening and continued functioning of the JNCL office in Washington was one of the most responsible acts the profession has ever undertaken, thanks to the daring and

sacrifice of ACTFL. Now, if we can set up and implement a national FL agenda and politicize it, we'll be able to seize the initiative and be masters of our own fate. Up to this time, however, greatness has been "thrust upon us" by outside forces. Until we become masters of our own future, we ourselves are our greatest hindrance in furthering the cause of our raison d'être: communication.

This hindrance has been perpetrated and perpetuated by us professionals; it has stemmed from the whole image factor of foreign language personnel. Professional self-effacement, a lack of status, and a congenital paranoia have all seemed to haunt our very being. As communications specialists we've been our greatest enemies since we've bred these feelings ourselves and communicated the wrong signals to the uninitiated. We've bemoaned our fate in "splendid" isolation while those in authority have only seized upon this weakness and turned it to their advantage. Program cuts, budget cuts, personnel cuts, etc. were only the results of a complacency on our part. We thought the status quo could be maintained. It can't! As society changes, we must be ready to address our place in the changes needed in that society.

There have been two other features - deeply rooted in the American educational system - which have also hindered the realization of our goals:

1) we have not always reached the right students

2) we have not always taught the right subject matter

Let me elaborate.

I think it's safe to assume that business, industry, agriculture, and government run this country. Where have we foreign language types stood in terms of the people involved in these enterprises? ..... Out in left field!

We concentrated on the traditional foreign language major at the expense of all others. In the process the attrition rate was staggering. It's not that we concentrated on the wrong students; it's just that we didn't concentrate enough on all the others - those who might have been good "minors." We made our subject matter esoteric, puzzling, and aloof. Our young students - that is, those who survived - were given a literary tool, a belleletristic key whereby they could have access to treasures reserved only for a privileged few - those bound for academia.

Now please understand me well, I have nothing against this noble goal, but to look upon it as the alpha and the omega of foreign language teaching is narrow-minded, elitist, suicidal, and downright aberrant. Communicating in a foreign culture is not reserved to academics. Business men, industrialists, agriculture specialists, and government employees have - or certainly ought to have - the linguistic tools necessary to deal with their foreign counterparts. We should have reached these people early in the educational process. If we had, we might not have had such tragic cultural and linguistic misunderstandings in this world since World War II.

Teaching the wrong subject matter came from this preceding reality. In response to the status quo operation, book publishers gave foreign language teachers that with which they were at ease

and happy: the typical two year sequence followed by literary study. Now, again, this is not wrong, but it is not enough. A foreign culture is not limited to its literary output - other disciplines and thought processes are involved: sociology, anthropology, psychology, political science, art, religion, music - and so on down the line.

We "goofed" badly, but others were there to respond to the need. Commercial language schools and federal language schools. What we didn't and couldn't do; they did. I might add parenthetically, that this observation might be up for some discussion later on.

As I sweep back over the hindrances, I shudder. I do that because I notice that, for the most part, that which has hindered the most in communicating in a foreign culture, has been the group responsible for that communication process - the foreign language teachers.

Luckily foreign language malpractice suits have not yet become popular. If they do, we'll lose all the cases, I'm sure.

Since I've rather spent the first part of this communication beating the collective breast of the foreign language professionals, I want to do quite the contrary as I approach that which helps in communicating in a foreign culture, for I feel very strong in saying that certain segments of the foreign language profession have been visionary, daring, and most active in promoting the kind of foreign language education which serves the <u>total</u> need of these United States.

Again, speaking historically, ACTFL was formed as we FL

people were riding the crest of the NDEA wave. American knee-jerk reaction was most obvious as a result of Sputnik and the profession answered the "call to arms." There was something to build on, however, and Monterey was certainly a part of it. That on which we were building was a common cornerstone laid by the government and the profession in concert.

World War II proved something which we forgot only too quickly as we regeared for peace: the U.S. is not alone on this planet. The government saw this, recognized it, and did something about it. The MLA, too, in conversation with federal agencies, saw the future and set up task forces to face the issues. By the time Sputnik went aloft, the machine was already in motion and the NDEA was also able to get off the ground quite quickly. From the Federal government, to the MLA, to ACTFL were all logical steps in setting up a national foreign language working machinery.

Now my purpose in stating this little bit of history is this: one of the greatest helps in even teaching us to <u>recognize</u> foreign cultures was the federal government. And continued federal involvement in the profession has brought us to grips with many realities which are now the professional priorities of the FL profession. The oral proficiency project is a good and typical example of this cooperative venture.

The profession - under the aegis of ACTFL and some of the regional conferences has clarified many of the pedagogical goals for the FL learner. Language-as- communication is at last becoming a reality and as this happens, we are more and more readily able to give realistic goals to the FL learner.

As the profession has been able to reach teachers, we have

been able to create a new breed of FL specialist. These people are aware of the fact that language exists within a culture and that language very often stems from that culture. Goodness knows we have yet to reach the vast majority of FL teachers, but there are those inspiring and informed teachers who are in the forefront when it comes to helping communicate in a foreign culture, seeing to it that culture is a part of that foreign language study.

These new FL teachers have added another new dimension to their work - they've gone public. They do not let their influence remain solely within the confines of the classroom. They have realized that successful students are their best publicity, but they've not been content to leave it at that. By going public they have brought the "good news" to middle America and the public has reacted. In preparing my Chronicle for the 1981 Northeast Conference Reports, I was dumbfounded by the penetration of the awareness factor of FL and International studies as it had been evidenced in the printed and electronic media.

Another interesting piece: in a recent poll of ACTFL membership a staggering 81% of our respondents stated that Public Awareness was their top ACTFL priority. This recent realization of the need for public awareness of and support for FL education opens hundreds of new doors for us as we deal with someone other than ourselves. If we play our cards well, this should be a most significant factor in our dealing with teaching others - that new public - how to communicate in a foreign culture. After all, once you begin to know how to communicate with those in your own culture, it only follows that you will perhaps be better prepared to teach them how to deal in another culture.

Let us leave the profession and the government alone for a while. Let us, rather, turn to the American society itself to see what we've got working for us. Do we have peculiarly American traits which can aid us in dealing with other cultures? The answer is a resounding "yes." I should like to call some of these to your attention.

In the first instance, we're a curious people and this curiosity, coupled with a bit of adventure, leads us to be a transient people. We like moving about - all over the world. The proverbial "European vacation" which used to be reserved for an elite is now a very democratic process and habit. We go all over Europe, Asia, Africa - north - east - south and west: vacationers, Peace Corps workers, the diplomatic corps, the military body, and students. This is all helping us get a handle on just what another culture is.

In the second place, there's a great ethnic consciousness in this country. As we've moved from the "melting pot" to the pluralistic society, we've traced our roots, taken pride in our differences; yet we've sought our commonalities.

An awareness of this ethnicity has brought us to a third plus: the popularization of foreign cultures: the Snoopy comic strip occasionally written in French; ethnic restaurants; Ma Bell's advertisements in the printed and electronic media for the overseas phone-calls; the tremendous popularity of "foreign" films, student exchange programs. This popularization can only have salutory effects as these other cultures are brought right into our communities and into our living rooms.

A fourth trait on which we can capitalize is the seemingly natural American "do-gooder" attitude. We sometimes get ourselves into deep trouble with this one, but it is a reality: Americans want to help - be it in Biafra or in Poland. We are eager to communicate and very much like one-on-one situations. This desire to help takes many forms: proselytizing because of religious convictions; giving the message of democracy to the world; economic and agricultural help to developing nations. This dogooder attitude can only serve us in good stead, if we go about it correctly.

A 5th trait - one which is criticized by many who don't fully appreciate it because they actually don't understand it - is that great American ethic: pragmatism. IF it works, if it produces results, use it!! I can think of nothing better to apply to the study of FL and cultures. If the American business community feels it can get along better by having a deep cultural understanding of the people with whom it's doing business then they'll attack the problem head-on. This very same pragmatic sense should run right through other segments of our society since it's a natural part of us. This has not always been the case and we must make the most of it. The DLI, as I understand it - along with other governmental inter-agency groups is using this pragmatic approach to the whole issue. Simply put: knowing a foreign language and its culture pays off all kinds of dividends.

This pragmatism does not necessarily stem from the formal educational process. As a matter of fact American pragmatism is only too often in direct conflict with American education. Students - far too often - never see any reason for foreign language and

cultural study. We've discussed this before. However, the formal educational process does play a role that helps a great deal: for good or bad it produces a natural selection process. I refer quite simply to the fact that college bound students - that is, good motivated students - have the greatest tendency to enroll in foreign language courses. And this is our 6th built-in help. It is this group which will find itself very often motivated to carry these special skills into business, politics, and government service.

At the present time one cannot refer to the formal educational scene without facing a 7th positive feature - one which we might want to debate - but, still, one which we must take note of. Foreign language requirements are being reinstated or even strengthened in many institutions where they had been dropped in the early seventies. What is even more interesting, these requirements are being tied to proficiency rather than to an accumulation of credits which, of course, mean nothing. We certainly cannot push aside this current trend in foreign language history.

Of course, being a part of the formal educational process myself, I cannot help but mention my 8th and last help. Knowing a foreign language and its culture just makes for a better person - a better citizen of the world. I believe that foreign language and culture studies are now being looked at as a part of "international education". International education is, I believe, a new look at the study of the humanities. It takes curricula and programs - such as those in foreign languages - that are already in existence and attempts to focus them in a new key. It is the liberalization of the tight, compact, compartmentalized, and

specialized academic structures which have tended to close us in, rather than open us out.

In the opening out process, that is, internationalization - we should develop a new attitude towards humanity itself - an attitude (or series of attitudes) which allow us to measure the values and goals of our society in contrast with those of other societies and cultures. In this liberalizing process we should be better able to provide our students with the mental capacities to deal with humanity and not just with other Americans or with those whose thought patterns are like our own.

With your indulgence I should like to devote the final portion of my time with you trying to do two things which, in their own way, will, I hope, synthesize all that has preceded.

I'd like to offer some commentary on what one can do to change negative attitudes; then, I'd like to suggest just how we might capitalize on the positive attitudes.

The best way to "attack" the anglo-American superiority complex is to show, by example if possible, that although we perhaps have a great deal, there are others that have even more. And some of what these "others" have contributed to our society have made us what we are. I guess that what I'm saying here is that we should put stress on the values of other cultures. We certainly cannot lead some kind of an "attack" on the national mentality, but we can surely try to modify it by showing how detrimental it is in the waning years of the 20th Century.

Our myopic and insular mentality can only be "cured" I believe, if we work toward internationalization. Get into

your classroom as many aids, people, films, etc., as possible which are from non-American sources. For instance, if you're dealing with French and Spanish, use Canada and all of Latin America for living examples of the cultural values you wish to illustrate. This will only serve to destroy this illusion of insularity which seems to have grown up around us. If we destroy the illusion, then we'll destroy the myth. If we branch out from our own borders, we'll start to create an international mindedness in our students which can then spread to every corner of the globe. With a little effort, I'm sure Americans can become citizens of the world.

Curing anti-intellectualism will take generations. Personally, I've never known anything quite like America's love/hate relationship with education. Still, I would hope that foreign language and culture teachers might be in the front lines when it comes to trying to cure this "illness." We cannot and should not remove the intellectual exercise from the foreign language/culture study, but we are probably going to be forced to create new curricular delivery systems whereby we can combine the intellectual experience with the utilitarian ethic. Speaking of pragmatism again, let's create learning situations whereby students are forced to use their minds while at the same time they're forced to use their foreign language skills. Let's show them it really works. You can do in a foreign tongue exactly what you can do in your mother tongue. It's done all over the world, every day, by millions of non-speakers of English.

As for snobism, play along with it. Democratize the whole process. If we spread the study of foreign languages and cultures

very deep into the American psyche, being different will no longer exist. We'll all learn greater tolerance and appreciation of other modes of thinking and acting. Every culture has its best foot to put forward. Find out what those "feet" are and use them as illustrations in class.

Public Awareness is the key to much of this change needed as we approach better ways to "sell" ourselves and our product. We must be willing to go that extra step - as others do - by becoming very visible and vocal at local, state, regional, and national levels. If we <u>really</u> believe in what we're doing, then why shouldn't we tell the whole world about it? I'm certainly not suggesting that we change a paranoia to a superiority complex - God forbid! But let's be proud of what we are and of what we do, rather than complain about how badly we're treated. Again, professional involvement is the key. It makes us all aware of just how powerful we can be when we work together on common goals in which we believe. There's also a tremendous bonus involved in professional gatherings: you can get your hands right on the latest techniques and methods which have proved their worth throughout the country.

As to materials and students, we've just got to work harder. We have to create innovative materials for new clienteles; we must create new curricular delivery systems for the non-major - especially for those who begin their FL/cultural study later in life and those who do this in a non-academic setting. In other words, we've got to aim for a whole new market. If we have a good product - excuse me for being so crass by referring to our work as "product" - but if we have a good product, then we'll have good

consumers. And to paraphrase someone else: what's good for foreign language and cultural study is good for the world in which we live!!

How can we capitalize on our successes? Easily. Just do more of good that we've already mentioned. Exploit everything that we have going for us.

The federal government and the foreign language profession should continue their mutually beneficial relationship. We've learned a great deal from this experience. One example: we've finally learned to keep in mind what students have told us for years: "I want to know how to communicate in the language." Language-as-communication must be our sine qua non. Experience has taught me that the rest will follow. Once you can control the language, you have the key to control the culture.

We must exchange with our students and they must exchange with us and with their peers all the positive features of the foreign residency or experience. We must also discuss - within the given context - just why a certain cultural phenomenon might have been negative. All this can only be done in constant dialogue and in an ambience of liberty. If we travel, let's set learning goals for ourselves. If we want to trace our ethnicity, then let's do it in an organized way and then share the experience. It will all serve to prove how different we all are and how those many differences have all contributed to the diversity and strength of our nation.

With our do-gooder attitudes and pragmatic approach to things, we must also seek out our better students, discover their interests,

and then try to focus their FL/cultural study to meet that need and gift.

I think I'd like to finish by saying that I hope today has been awareness day. Because just about everything I've said - and sometimes left unsaid - has been attached to an awareness of one thing or another. It's right there in front of us, but do we always take the time to recognize it and use it to our advantage?

We must believe in what we're doing, but we must also believe that we can do it better. If we don't become more aware of certain realities then we'll still be trying to pull ourselves into the 20th Century when our students are already the leaders of the 21st.